

Siberian Mennonite History Conference

by Paul Toews

Germans of Siberia—History and Culture was a conference that took place in Omsk, Russia, June 2-4, 2010. It was a unique and historic gathering. Academic gatherings focused on the history and culture of Germans in Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and the Commonwealth of Independent

took place in European Russia between 1789 and 1943. The Siberian and Asiatic Russian chapter opened in the 1890s and has been the center of the story since the 1940s.

Omsk was a strategic location for it is adjacent to one of the largest Siberian Mennonite populations. A minority group long persecuted in the Omsk region because of their stubborn resistance to Sovietization, Mennonites now were sitting in the academic and political centers discussing their history. Conference sessions took place in the assembly rooms and halls of the Omsk Oblast (region) governmental building, F. M. Dostoyevsky Omsk State University, Karl Marx Scholarly Center, and the Omsk Oblast Museum of Regional studies.

Omsk State University, University of Winnipeg, and Fresno Pacific University sponsored the conference, which brought together academics from Kazakhstan, Russia, Germany, Canada and the United States. The Mennonite Section included twelve papers prepared by scholars from North America, twelve from Russia, two from Kazakhstan, and one by an aussiedler with roots in Kazakhstan. Two of papers from Russian participants were from representatives of existing Mennonite communities in the Omsk and Slavgorod regions. In addition to those who presented scholarly papers other



The three organizers of the conference in Omsk on Germans of Siberia were Royden Loewen of the University of Winnipeg, Tatiana Smirnova of the F. M. Dostoyevsky Omsk State University, and Paul Toews of Fresno Pacific University. (Photo Credit: Paul Toews)

States (CIS) occur with some regularity. What made this one different was a section devoted to the history of Mennonites in Siberia. Never before had a collection of international scholars gathered to discuss this significant, and often neglected, chapter of the Russian Mennonite story. Writing about the Russian Mennonite story has been dominated by the chapter that



Dr. Peter Wiebe, director of the Omsk Museum of Regional Studies
(Photo Credit: Paul Toews)



Dr. Tatiana Smirnova, Professor of Ethnography at F. M. Dostoyevsky Omsk State University (Photo Credit: Paul Toews)

representatives from Mennonite communities in Siberia, Germany and Canada were in attendance.

The papers written by the Russian scholars were largely drawn from materials of state archival institutions. Both the Tsarist government and the Soviets kept many records on foreign peoples and differing confessional communities. Scholars in search of the Mennonite story have discovered an abundance of materials in many different regional and central archival agencies in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The papers written by North American scholars were based more on family materials, memoirs and interviews with Siberian Mennonite emigrants to the West or their descendants.

The discussions, while ranging from the initial beginnings of the Mennonite presence in Siberian and Asiatic Russia to the present, centered on the long Soviet period. Aileen Friesen, a member of the North American organizing committee, in a press release for the Mennonite media summarized parts of the conference in the following way: "The majority of conference presentations addressed the experiences of Mennonites during the Soviet period. A number of Russian scholars utilized archival sources from the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, to uncover the treatment and the responses of Mennonites to the state's repressive policies.... The atmosphere of repression and uncertainty influenced the relationship between Mennonites, Baptists and Evangelicals in Siberia."

Scholars from the former Soviet Union are increasingly finding it more difficult to access archival sources that were readily available to researchers in the 1990s. Fortunately, the collaborative work of the Fresno Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies with the Russian Academy of Science has published many documents and thus ensured their widespread availability.

The Russian Mennonite communities of Siberia and North America are both diaspora settlements from European Russia. Both shared a common history into the late nineteenth and/or early part of the twentieth century. Since then, their histories have diverged and yet there remain many commonalities. It is a bit surprising that the post-Soviet period, which again permitted contact between the two diasporas, has not produced a more sustained relationship between them. The organizers of the conference hope that the contacts growing out of this academic event may foster stronger relationships and more exchanges in the future.

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